Writing on wax

Roger Tomlin

A good way to make other people pay attention is the rhetorical device known as *paraleipsis,* which the emperor Marcus Aurelius was told he would find in a speech by Cato the Elder. Cato's problem was how to advertise both his achievements *and* his modesty, and he solved it by ordering that the record be read in open court. Then, as each item was read out, he interjected: 'Rub it out, they don't want to hear that; rub it out, *right down to the wood'.* What did he mean by this expression?

The clerk was reading from a set of waxed tablets, which consisted of waxed wooden boards hinged together. These 'pages' (the Roman word for them is *cera,* 'wax') were made by splitting a block of regular-grained wood such as silver fir into thin slabs, each of which was hollowed out to make a shallow recess filled with coloured wax. Red wax is mentioned by Ovid, but black was usual, beeswax mixed with soot. The scribe then wrote on this smooth surface with a sharp-pointed *stilus* like a small knitting-needle with a fishtail end, the fishtail being used for rubbing-out. The letters showed up as white wood against the black wax. Thus a waxed tablet was ideal for writing short texts or taking notes: it was a primitive Roman word-processor, a writing material that could be recycled.

For students of Roman Britain, waxed tablets have another advantage: in waterlogged conditions they sometimes survive where paper has always perished. The black wax, it is true, has usually disappeared, but fortunately Cato was wrong: it was not easy to erase 'right down to the wood'. The Roman scribe often pressed so hard, that his needle-point cut into the wood itself, and these minute marks can still be seen. Letters are often incomplete, or in embarrassing profusion. This is because the beginning and end of letter-strokes, where the pressure was less, fade away, and the would-be decipherer is confronted by a procession of short diagonal strokes. There may also be confusing traces of a previous text. The grain of the wood has a way of swallowing horizontal strokes or of introducing false 'strokes'. Last, and least of our problems, are the peculiar letter-forms themselves. But for anyone who cares to chance their eye at decipherment, here is the alphabet. Just remember that the scribe was writing in a resistant medium, which prevented him from making loops or linking letters; and that letters vary slightly or are incompletely preserved.

Try this alphabet on the tablet illustrated here, if you have the code-breaker's mentality; but not if you believe that epigraphic texts come from God already edited. Go straight to the transcription instead.

The new Carlisle tablet

This tablet is a recent discovery, and if you are reading Tacitus' *Agricola,* you will find it relevant. It is the top half of a waxed 'page' found in 1990 in the basement of Carlisle Museum. The best excavations are in museum basements, they say, but for once this is literally true: a lift-shaft was being made, and first the Carlisle Archaeological Unit cut through the cellar floor into what proved to be an early Roman cobbled road; in a mud-filled pothole they found first-century sherds, and this tablet. Here is a photograph, and a schematic drawing which excludes the traces of an earlier text. Note the borders which enclosed the wax, now lost, and the notch for the binding cord.

Here is the literal reading, followed by a transcription which supplies modern punctuation and capital letters, and expands the abbreviations; the hooked symbol '7' means 'century':

imp domitiano uiiii cos
uii idus nouembres q cassius
secundus miles leg xx 7 calui
prisci scribsi me debere
c geminio mansueto militi
leg eiusdem 7 uetti proculi
denarios centum quos . . .[.]
[...]

lmp(eratore) Domitiano VIIII co(n)s(ule)
VII Idus Novembres. Q(uintus) Cassius
Secundus, miles leg(ionis) XX (centuria) Calvi
Prisci, scribsi me debere
G(aio) Geminio Mansueto, militi
leg(ionis) eiusdem (centuria) Vetti Proculi,
denarios centum quos [tibi?]
[…]

In the Latin note scribsi for scripsi ('I have written'), which was written as it was pronounced. The scribe may also have been thinking of the present tense, scribo ('I write'), but he gets low marks for classical grammar. Here then is a translation:

'In the 9th consulship of the Emperor Domitian, on the 7th day before the Ides of November [7 November 83]. I, Quintus Cassius Secundus, soldier of the Twentieth Legion, century of Calvius Priscus, have written that I owe Gaius Geminius Mansuetus, soldier of the same legion, century of Vettius Proculus, one hundred *denarii* which [I will repay you . . . *date due and interest]'.*

I.O.U. four months' pay

Epigraphic documents to a historian are like Roman coins: they are worth more in context, so I will try to supply it. This document is half a Roman soldier's note of hand, his I.O.U., the first ever found in Britain, but close enough to ones from Egypt for us to have an idea of the missing lines. Quintus Cassius Secundus has borrowed money from a fellow-soldier, Gaius Geminius Mansuetus. They are both Roman citizens (note their three names), as they had to be to join a legion. The Twentieth was one of the four legions which garrisoned Roman Britain, a formidable unit of some 5,000 heavy infantry engineers. Legionaries were always identified by their 'century', a sub-unit of about 80 men commanded by a centurion equivalent to a company-commander, a captain, in the modern British Army. The centurions were called Calvius Priscus and Vettius Proculus.

Cassius Secundus is borrowing 100 *denarii,* exactly four months' pay. By coincidence, in 83 the army had just received its first pay-rise in more than a century, from 225 *denarii* to 300, probably paid in three instalments of 100 *denarii.* Was Secundus mortgaging the first instalment of his new pay? It is hopeless to translate Roman money into modern terms: 100 *denarii* was worth four *aurei,* about three-quarters of an ounce of gold, today worth about £175. But here is another way of looking at it. The basic pay of the equivalent soldier in the British Army, a Private Class I, is £11,023 a year. In 83 the Professor of Rhetoric at Rome was paid 25,000 *denarii* a year, and it is easy to calculate what today's Professor *should* be earning now: over £900,000 a year.

Aftermath of Mons Graupius

More can be said about the time and place, and here the *Agricola* is relevant. Gnaeus Julius Agricola, Tacitus tells us, commanded the Twentieth Legion during 71-4, when the Romans conquered most of northern England. The oak trees used to build the fort at Carlisle, we know from tree-ring evidence, were felled in 72 or 73. The builders were probably the Twentieth Legion, which was based at Wroxeter in the Welsh Marches, but was active much further north. After an interval, Agricola returned to Britain in 77 as commander-in-chief; in the course of seven campaigns, summarised by Tacitus in much less detail than we would like, he led the army as far as the Scottish Highlands. His old legion, the Twentieth, has been regarded as the western pincer of the conquest, and it was certainly present at the battle of Mons Graupius to which Tacitus devotes so much space, without either dating or locating it. Most scholars now think it was fought in the late summer of 83 somewhere in the far north-east, towards the Moray Firth perhaps (like that other successful piece of butchery, Culloden Moor in 1746).

The new tablet is interesting, therefore, since it confirms the presence of the Twentieth Legion in the north-west. There is no archaeological evidence that the whole legion was ever based at Carlisle, but elements must have been here, at the important crossing of the river Eden. This tablet was inscribed within weeks of Mons Graupius, and presents a disarming picture of two legionaries in the aftermath of battle. The *Agricola* concludes with the bold statement that Agricola has been described to posterity and will live. By chance we now have the names of four of his men, the two legionaries and their centurions. Perhaps we knew one of them already. Soon after Mons Graupius the Twentieth Legion began to build itself a new base at Inchtuthil on the river Tay north of Perth, only to be withdrawn to Chester in 86 or 87. Here the tombstone survives of an eighty-year-old veteran called Cassius Secundus, maybe the same man. If so, I do hope Mansuetus had got his money back by then.

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